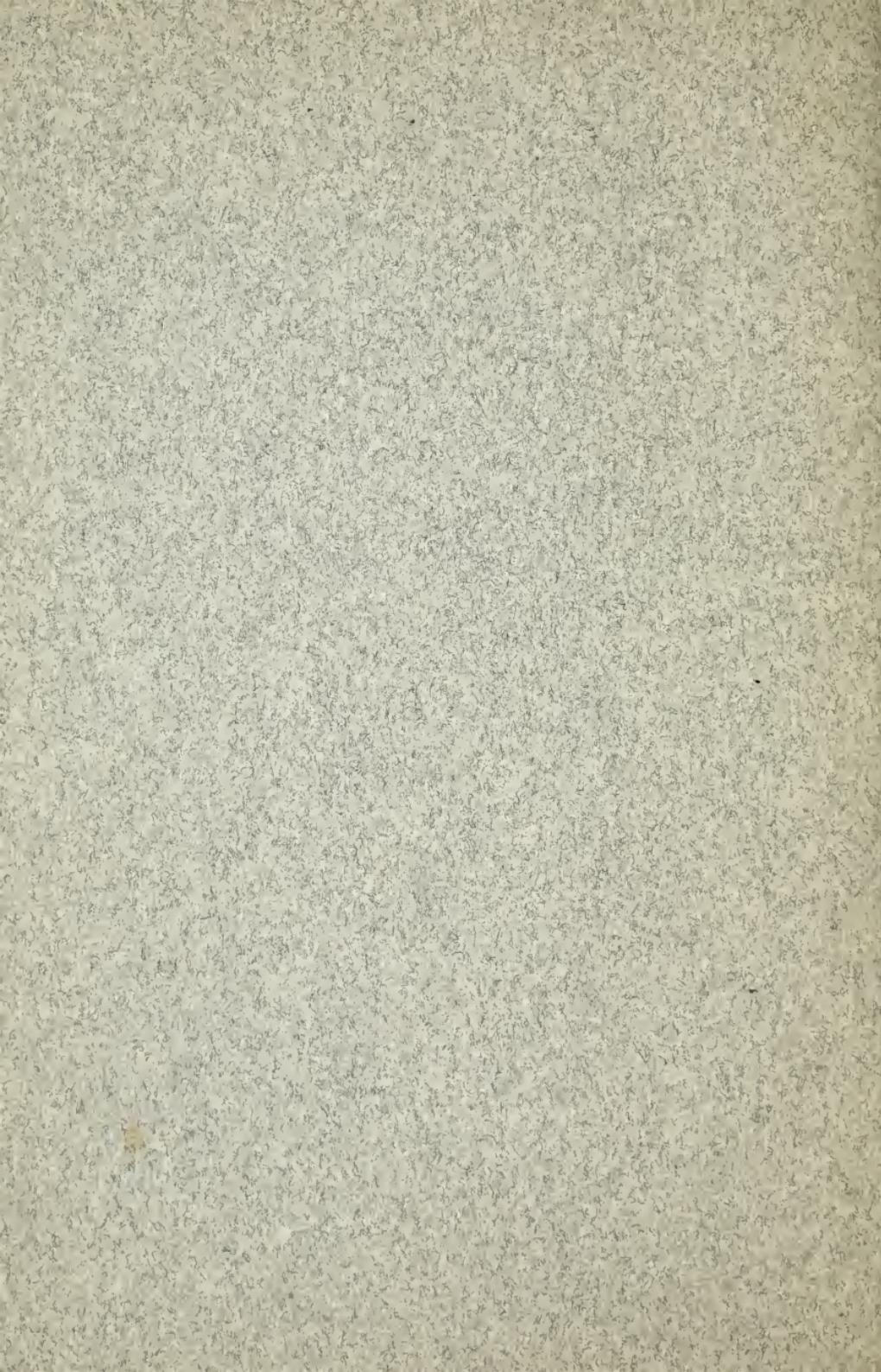


The Call

of

The City

J. H. McIlvaine



The Call

of

The City

A Sermon

by the

Rev. J. H. McIlvaine, D.D.

Calvary Church

Pittsburgh

December 13, 1908

"Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me."—Lamentations 1:12.

THese words take us back to a time nearly six hundred years before Christ, when Jerusalem had fallen into the hands of the cruel Chaldeans. There is no ode or elegy more pathetic and tragic than this Hebrew poet's wail over his wronged and ruined city. Jerusalem is represented as plunged in the lowest depths of despair, and as appealing for sympathy and help to the passing travelers. "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?" The words are more familiar to us through their later association with the sorrow and passion of our blessed Lord. But this association, however justifiable and fitting, is only a secondary application. This ancient lament was primarily the appeal of a great city for sympathy and help; and therefore we are not forcing the words, but using them in their original and proper meaning, when we regard them as the call of a great city to give heed to its sins, its sorrows, its wrongs, and not to pass them by in indifference as if they were nothing to us.

There is always something about a great

city that appeals to the imagination. It is much more than the mere sum of its inhabitants. It has an independent life and character, a name, a responsibility, a reputation, an influence, a destiny of its own. It rises and falls, grows and flourishes, sins and suffers, rejoices and mourns, over and above the experience of its individual citizens. You have only to read the Hebrew poets and prophets to see how they personified and idealized Jerusalem. "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. They shall prosper that love thee. If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning, and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy." When devout souls thought of Heaven, it was as a new Jerusalem that they conceived and pictured it. Surely love for a city can never reach a higher point than that. A new Pittsburgh, a new London, a new Paris, would not be a very impressive or satisfactory description of Heaven to us. But a new Jerusalem satisfied the highest conceptions and aspirations of the Hebrew soul. Even the Son of Man, who loved and sought to save the whole world, felt toward Jerusalem as the Hebrew poets and saints felt. It had for Him the same attractions and claims; it was the city of His heart, the city that moved and touched Him, as the interests of no single life could do. Its woe and fate were those of a vast, majestic, conscious, intelligent, responsible personage, and brought tears to his eyes. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the

prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not." Jesus Christ weeping over the city of Jerusalem is surely justification enough for speaking of civic sympathy, loyalty, patriotism, as one essential expression of the truly Christian life and spirit. He who came to open the way to Heaven came also to redeem earth; and the religion which he taught is the best charter of the city that now is, as well as the prophecy and promise of the City of God, which is to come.

This then is the first thought I want to impress upon you, that a city is not a mere assemblage of individuals, a mass of mere units. An aggregate of individuals doing what they please does not make a city. Long ago a Greek philosopher used those very words "doing what they please," as descriptive of barbarians, who had not yet attained the dignity of citizenship and civilization. We have a true city only where we find a community of men and women impressed with the idea of life in common, from which all derive advantage, for which all feel responsibility, to which all contribute. Is it not then a most serious matter to find such multitudes in our cities who have no sense of what it means to belong to a great community, and no idea of the duty and responsibility which all share? Many—appallingly many—among us, care nothing for the problems of the great city. They do not

realize that there are any problems except how to get more money, more convenience or amusement or pleasure in and from the city. It is only the few here and everywhere who care enough about the things on which the public good depends to give them time and thought and effort. Only a few on whom the fire of the public spirit descends. The others, with education, ability, means and leisure that give them power and opportunity to do something for the public good, are content to let things alone so long as they themselves are comfortable and their interests do not suffer, content to let a few, already overburdened, do all the work, and bear all the burdens. They are willing enough to take all the advantages and privileges of life in a great community; they are not so willing to contribute anything to its good, except their taxes and their criticism.

What then we may ask, are some of the causes of this indifference? Among the young, it is to a large extent due to their training in childhood to think only of themselves, to live selfish, irresponsible, pleasure-loving lives; instead of being taught that every life which draws something from the common good and adds nothing to it, is an unmanly, dishonorable, shameful life. Then, love of ease and quiet and personal indulgence tempt many, who might be rendering service to the community, to be content with idleness and indifference. "We are quiet people," they say,—quiet like the Parisian who was found fishing in the

Seine when the streets of Paris were running with blood. They have no sense of responsibility. They settle in the suburbs if they can, far off from the city's sights and sounds, as if their individual and domestic peace and comfort were all, and the well-being of the community nothing to them. Then, there is always a large number kept from all public service by the demands of business, by the eagerness to accumulate wealth. Business dominates all the thought, interest, energy of life for them. They are business men, or rather business machines, and nothing more. Sometimes this apathy to the demands and duties of citizenship is defended by the claims of personal culture. But the end of all true and noble culture is more power and fitness for the service of humanity. Among some, this tendency to neglect the duties of citizenship is encouraged by a spurious pietism, which affects to regard such matters as the better housing of the poor, the better health and happiness of the community, the better government of the city as worldly things unworthy of their attention as spiritual beings whose citizenship is in Heaven. A spurious pietism, I say, because while made an excuse for neglecting the world's duties, it seldom leads to the neglect of the world's advantages. Beware of this form of religion. It is worse than no religion at all. True religion, remember, is not the seeking of one's own comfort and happiness, or even salvation, but the service of God and man. Christ did not come into the world merely to save a soul

here and there, but to change human life and redeem human society. The nearer we come to the God whom He reveals the nearer we come to the man for whom he died, to man with his problems and needs, his temptations and tragedies. The religion of Jesus Christ means the denial and final destruction of selfishness as it exists in the individual life, and as it is organized in the social, business and political world. It means a finer justice, a nobler charity, a purer and more prevailing spirit of brotherhood. It means, what the world has never yet seen, what the best of men have as yet only dreamed of—a Christian society, a Christian civilization. There is no finer field for the realization of this Christian unselfishness than is to be found in the life of citizenship. What is called the public spirit, the spirit which makes men willing to spend and be spent in the service of the city or the country, is one of the best things among us, and it becomes, as man rises in nobility, and true religion, another name for the Christian spirit—the Christian spirit expressing itself civically or politically. No man can be a good Christian who is not a good citizen. It is sad when the light on our altars begins to grow dim. It is no less sad when the public spirit begins to wane.

In saying this, I am speaking not to men alone, but to those who form the larger part of every congregation—to women also. A few years ago the Archbishop of Canterbury, in a meeting held in London, took occasion to

rebuke the women of England for the little interest and care they showed in public matters, public movements, public work. While bearing the strongest testimony to the intelligence, tact and devotion of the few who do care and are trying to do something to lessen the sum of social wrong and misery, he said that women are more often guilty of absolute indifference to public matters than men. This indifference, this want of public spirit, this absence of any sense of personal responsibility that one sees in so many women, is due no doubt rather to training and circumstances, than to character or lack of capacity. Though the women of today, as compared with the women of yesterday, are more awake to the ideals and duties of citizenship, have a wider interest and sympathy, and are touched by a new sense of social responsibility, one of the most hopeful features of the times, yet the common lot and training of women fails to develop in them a social and public spirit. They are educated for household affairs, for society, for literature or art, but not to take an interest in public matters, and are not fitted for the wider life, even when the opportunity comes. Improvement in circumstances, which in the case of men often brings with it a sense of larger interests and wider claims, means with too many women only a better chance for social display, better clothes, better houses, better entertainments, and more opportunity for small social triumphs for themselves and their children.

Is it not a singular thing that a civilization which gives the feminine form to all its personifications of wisdom, justice, liberty, law, and even to the city itself, should assume and encourage the idea that the duties and responsibilities of citizenship are exclusively those of men. Yet without becoming political partisans, or entering into the hot and rude struggle of parties for place and power, there is much that women can and ought to do as citizens. They can contribute much in many ways both direct and indirect to the life of the community, its truth, righteousness, purity. They can do much for order, beauty, the amelioration of social conditions, and the raising of the average of social happiness. They can do much to create public opinion of the right sort, to uphold high ideals, to cherish and guard the truer and better life of the city and nation. What a wonderful thing it would be, what wonderful results it would have, if not : few, but all the educated women of this city, felt something of the same concern for the well being of the community that they feel for their families ; felt bound to promote the common good in every way that was open to them ! Long ago Ruskin told the women of England what they could do to prevent war: "If you only cared enough," he said, "If you only cared as much to prevent war as you care to prevent your china from being broken, there would be no more war." If you only cared enough! Ah, that is the supreme thing. There is hardly anything that women cannot do if they care

enough. If women only cared enough for the city to strive for the things that make for its order and beauty, the effect would be immeasurable. A few are doing good, noble, most efficient service in many directions, and are busy devising further methods of enlarging and improving their work for the community. But still they are comparatively few. What is wanted is that this feeling of social responsibility, of enthusiasm for the public service, should spread until the few become the many. Perhaps this is the thing that is needed, for which the world is waiting. After so much has failed that was once relied on to redeem and purify society, the latent force of a true and cultured womanhood has yet to come into fuller and wider play.

Who can imagine what this city would become if all its educated and enlightened citizens, men and women, really cared for its best interests, were enthusiastic for its improvement and progress in the best ways, were so inspired with a sense of social responsibility as not to withhold any service they could possibly render. Do you say, What can I do? I am an insignificant individual, with no influence—merely a nobody. I say first of all get rid of that way of thought and feeling. It is not creditable but disgraceful to you. You have no right to be nobody. You are here in the world to be somebody, and whether you know it or not, you are somebody, for you belong to a community in which every individual has significance for good or ill. Do not

say or think for a moment that the city is nothing to you, or you are nothing to it. Think what this city would be if it were filled with men and women like that, indifferent to the public good, holding selfishly aloof from the public service, saying by their action or neglect of action we do not care, it is not our concern, the well-being of the city is nothing to us. Let that spirit spread and prevail and it would lay society in ashes; it would cause the ruin and downfall of every city and nation under the sun. The only thing that makes the life of a city durable, that preserves the city from corruption, that keeps it from becoming the most horrible, abominable, awful thing in the world, is the constant, determined, self-sacrificing efforts of a few—a comparatively small minority—who carry the welfare of the city deep in their hearts, and make it one of the objects of their lives.

Do you say again, what can I do for the city? For one thing, you can live a true, honest, honorable, Christian life at home, in society, in business, and through all the relations that you sustain. It is indeed the greatest contribution that one can make to his city or nation to be a good man or woman, reverencing truth, justice, honor, nobility, chivalry, and trying to exalt them in all that one is and does. Character is and must be the basis of service and influence.

That is not enough. You must make it part of your religion, as William Penn said, to see that your city and country are well gov-

erned. You must study social conditions, needs, possibilities, ideals, public affairs and public movements. You must think more of these things and talk more about them. You will be better men, better women, better Christians, if you think more earnestly and seriously about them. You must make yourself familiar with what is being done, what needs to be done, what other cities are doing. You must give some portion of your time, your thought, your energy, to work that bears directly on the welfare of the community. That you can do little is no reason for doing nothing. If you cannot be good leaders, you can be good followers, and the leader is nothing without the follower. If you cannot do much yourself, you can uphold the hands of those who are doing much with your appreciation and honor. Be known as the open enemies of everything unfair, unjust, dishonorable, cruel: the open friends of everything right and true and just and pure. Be very tolerant of opinions differing from yours in political, ecclesiastical and theological matters; but be very intolerant of social wrong and injustice and wretchedness. Fight constantly against the things, which degrade and corrupt our common life, and spare no pains or effort to win the things that are best for all. Get rid of the idea that the only or the truest patriotism is the patriotism of the battle-field. Patriotism can be shown in the fever den and the slum, as well as on the battle-field; in the fight against injustice, fraud, oppression, corruption, as well as in conflict

with foreign foes; in saving men's lives at home as well as in destroying them abroad. The greatest evil and danger that threatens us is not foreign invasion, but civic apathy and indifference; and the greatest need is not soldiers, but citizens.

Like Jerusalem of old, this city of ours might appeal, not to passing travelers, but to its own citizens and children. Is it nothing to you, the sins and sorrows and wrongs of your city; the disgrace, the shame, the reproach of your city; the blots and blemishes on its good name, that make it, not an example, but a warning to other cities? Is it nothing to you, its well-being, its true and highest prosperity, the work that must be done to make and keep the city clean, healthy, beautiful, sober, pure, righteous? Is it nothing to you, men and women, that the conditions of honest, clean, decent, virtuous life are not within the reach of a large number of our people? Nothing to you that thousands of our fellow-citizens are living in overcrowded, ill-ventilated, unsanitary and viciously arranged dwellings, where possibly ten, twenty, thirty families live in ten, twenty or thirty rooms, some even taking boarders; with no water save that which is carried up from a filthy court, and no air or light save that which comes from a dark alley? Is it nothing to you that over and against this wretched travesty of home is the gilded saloon on every corner, the only place of resort for both men and boys, with all the awful increase of evil, poverty and wretchedness which in-

temperance causes? Is it nothing to you that the death rate of this city is greater than that of any city of its size in the country, and almost in the world; that in some districts one out of every three babies born dies for want of air and nourishment; that there are more deaths by violence than in any other city of the land; that thousands of valuable lives are sacrificed every year that might be saved? Is it nothing to you that millions of the people's money, which might be used for the people's good, are wasted, and sometimes worse than wasted? Is it nothing to you that this, the leading city of the world industrially, is behind most of the cities of the world in civic matters; that this, one of the richest cities in the world, is one of the most parsimonious in its expenditure for the public good?

Is it nothing to you that there are signs of the dawning of a better day; that though things are bad they are not as bad as they were; that the efforts of a few—a small minority of devoted men and women,—in politics, in civic associations, in public and private charities, have done much for the betterment of social conditions; that through the efforts of the Bureau of Health, the Chamber of Commerce, the Civic Club, the Tuberculosis League, the Juvenile Court, Kingsley House, the Associated Charities, and many other noble agencies too numerous to mention, the worst tenements have been torn down, the worst sanitary arrangements improved, four-fifths of the typhoid fever has ceased, the ravages of tubercu-

losis are being checked, the cloud of smoke and grime that hangs over our city is thinning out, public spirit is awakening, a sense of social responsibility is spreading, our city authorities are doing more than ever before, and all this through the efforts of a few. What has been done by a few only shows what might be done if the few could become the many, if everyone were doing something, if everyone were interested and concerned for the welfare of the city; if everyone were asking, with Saint Paul of old, What wilt thou have me do as a Christian citizen?

In the middle ages the Church preached a crusade for the recovery of the city of Jerusalem from the power of the infidel, a crusade which stirred all Europe to deeds of heroism and self-sacrifice. That order of service belongs to a vanished age. "The knights' bones are dust, and their good swords rust," but the spirit which animated the best of them must live on, seeking new and nobler expression. A crusade to deliver the city from the powers that prey upon its life, from the wrongs and cruelties that oppress it, from the sin and shame that degrade it, that is the crusade to which we are all called in the diligent, conscientious discharge of our civic duties, until the city becomes indeed a City of God, wherein dwelleth righteousness.



